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Despite city barriers to block 'Barrie Freedom Rally,' organizer vows it will go ahead



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BARRIE, ONT. -- The City of Barrie's mayor issued an emergency order to immediately close and fence off Meridian Place to stop the ongoing gatherings in the city's downtown.

Barrie Mayor Jeff Lehman called the measure necessary following more than a month of protests.

Earlier this week, the city said it was determined to develop a plan to put an end to the 'Barrie Freedom Rally' that draws hundreds of people to Meridian Place to protest the government's strict lockdown measures.

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In a release Thursday, Lehman said, "The gatherings that put people's lives at risk need to stop. I want to thank residents of Barrie who have stayed home to keep each other safe at this critical point in the pandemic. The city will continue to pursue additional steps to stop illegal gatherings and hold those responsible accountable."

The city previously said it would explore "all available actions to stop these gatherings, including possible court action for an injunction to restrain the organizers."

Rally organizer Tyler Nicholson vowed the gatherings would continue, citing free speech and peaceful assembly.

"Protesting is the lack of evidence to support these unlawful lockdowns, right? We're not here to deny COVID. We're not here to deny that people die every year of upper-respiratory infections." He added, "I'm just here to say to you, Jeff [Lehman], we'll be here at 12 o'clock Saturday, and we'll be peaceful as always."

The mayor and health unit called on residents interested in protesting to demonstrate virtually and stay-at-home to slow the spread of the disease in the community.

"This is not something you should go and be curious about. It is wrong and dangerous, and that is why we're taking the steps we are," Lehman said.

"Individuals who participate in these rallies are taking a risk to their health and to the broader health of the community," said Dr. Charles Gardner earlier this week in response to the ongoing gatherings.

In recent weeks, bylaw officers have ticketed several participants at demonstrations, which see multiple people without face masks or social distancing.

The rallies grabbed the attention of political figures who attended the protests this month, including PPC leader Maxime Bernier and MP Derek Sloan.

Health officials with the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit said they were working with police to step up enforcement of anyone "not in compliance" with the stay-at-home order.

The province-wide stay-at-home order took effect on April 8 and is in place until at least May 20 to curb the spread of COVID-19 amid rising case numbers and alleviate the pressures on [fatigued hospital staff](#) and [hospital capacity](#).

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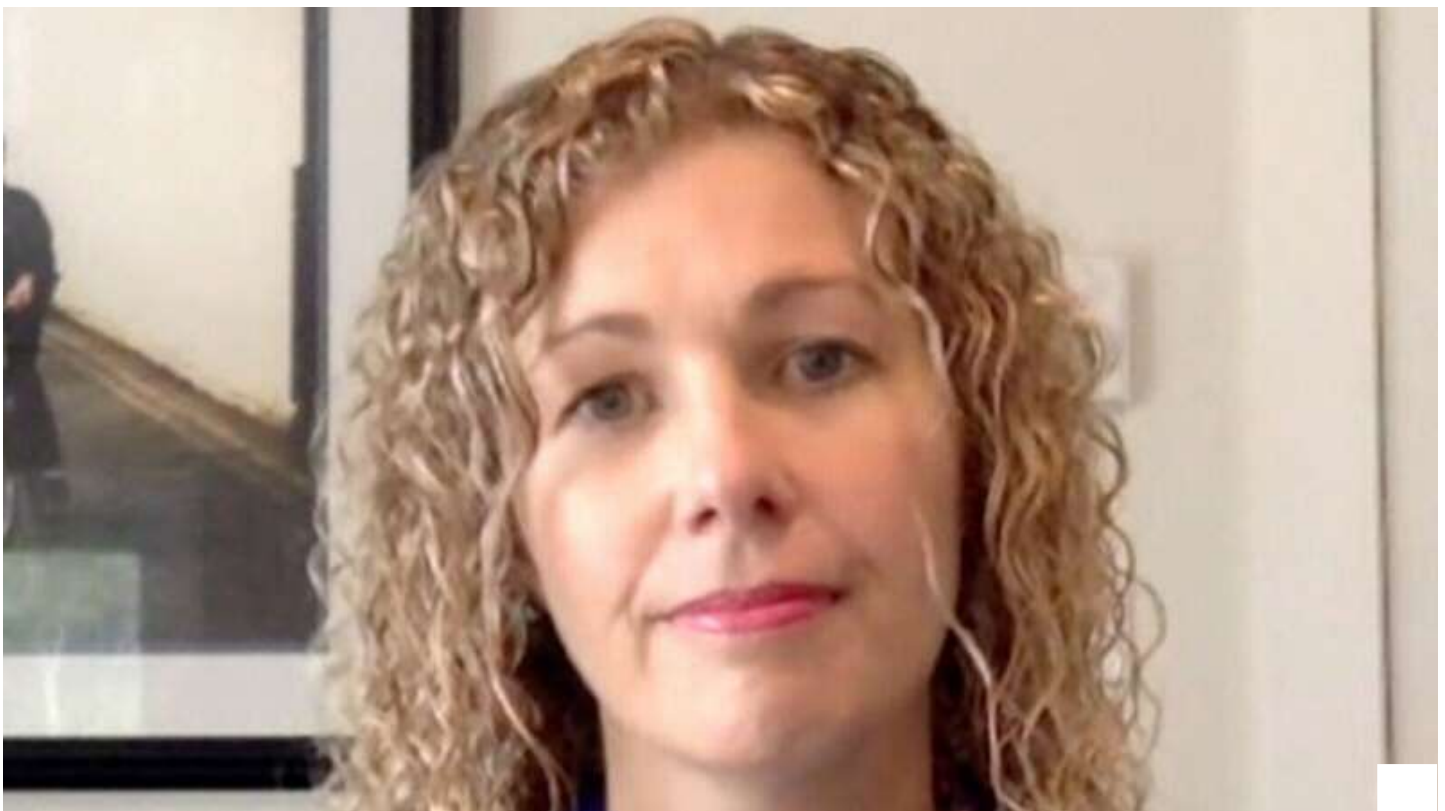
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